

# Freire's Legacy

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***Paulo Freire's legacy needs to be assessed in the context of the crisis in which educational theory finds itself. In the third world, Freire's locus of theorising, there seems to be no end to the sharp contradiction between the primary functions of education; its selective or certifying function and its role in enhancing the intellectual capital of society. Can we then say that Freire provided a mere ideological sop to live by during a period of all-round gloom and difficulties for humanist education?***

PAULO FREIRE's death in the summer of 1997 remained largely unnoticed in India's academic world. That makes sense, considering how marginal a presence education has as an area of enquiry in our academia. What makes things worse for Freire's memory is the strange fact that in India the left, unlike the right, has no serious concern for education. But even the non-government organisations (NGOs) world, which owes a substantial part of its current key vocabulary and its legitimacy to Freire, paid him no major tribute. To an extent we can attribute this indifference to the general despair prevailing among those who believe that ideas ought to permeate social action. A possible parallel reason relates to the culture of activism which treats any time taken for reflection, for example, reflection on a departed's legacy, as an essentially academic exercise, implying second-rate importance. The concept of activism is a part of Freire's legacy, and though an incomplete part, it now appears to be the only form of resistance that works. Finally, one other reason for the indifference shown to Freire may be the steady decline of Freire's own distinctiveness over the last few years of his life. Freire's rise as a source of dramatic influence, and an eventual 'fair' constitute a story of dramatic influence, and an eventual 'fair' constitute a story of some historical value, especially from the viewpoint of colonised societies like that of India.

Towards the end of the 1960s Freire was thrown into exile by the military rulers of his native Brazil. They had found the 43-year old Freire guilty of encouraging peasants to reflect on their own condition with a view to waging a collective effort towards changing it. For Freire, this was an educational engagement with the people. Out of this experience and the

response it received from the people and their military rulers, Freire composed his elaborate philosophical statement which first appeared in English translation in the early 1970s under the title *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Within a short while, the book became a worldwide hit, initially competing with another popular text of the 1970s, namely *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich, but eventually outpacing it. Illich himself described Freire's book as "a truly revolutionary pedagogy". Several other books by Freire followed, but for the vast majority of his readers the *Pedagogy* remained his most reliable and distinctive statement. Freire resented this fact as any writer would, but he acknowledged his readers' identification of him with his first book by naming his penultimate book as *Pedagogy of Hope*. Published in 1994, it provides a collection of personal narratives on the reception of the first *Pedagogy*, Freire's last book, published just before his death, was *Letters to Christina*, his niece to whom he wrote some 18 long letters explaining his life and work. The last letter shows how anxious Freire was in the evening of his life about the threat posed to human dignity and freedom by what he called the rebirth of Nazi-Fascist ideology everywhere and the left's vacillating stance towards its own role.

The climate of ideas which characterised the early 1970s greatly explains the popularity of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Hope for the downtrodden had been running high since the late 1960s, riding the tide of anti-Vietnam-war feelings in the US and the sweeping successes of Mao's Red Guards in China. The crude attempt made by the Soviet Union to maintain its dominance in eastern Europe helped only to underline the importance of people in relation to governments. Student protest against university curricula

in France and elsewhere had called into question the old, established structures of knowledge. The turn of the decade offered a remarkably fertile climate to sociologists and other analysts of educational systems. They marshalled a strong case for suspecting the role of education in the context of the constructing a civil society by purely constitutional means. Uncovering the hidden, and later on not-so-hidden, agenda of hegemonic elements active in shaping education became the central preoccupation of educational research and rendered an impressive yield of studies and ideas. Freire's *Pedagogy* came as a kind of last word in this ethos, its uniqueness residing in the fact that it presented not just an erudite analysis of the evil that schools perpetrate, but also an exciting remedy.

Freire's major contribution to progressive educational theory lay in his attempt to introduce 'oppression' as a basic variable in the model of human society that education had to deal with. Oppression, we can say, is the connecting theme of all his works. Freire suggests that any educational theory which does not deal with the problem of oppression is incomplete and unacceptable. The humanistic agenda of education has no meaning or validity, we feel while reading Freire's writings, if educators and the curriculum they uphold ignore the decline of humanity into an oppressor-oppressed duality. He argues that prevailing educational practices by and large exacerbate the dehumanised state of the human world. This critique, as well as the remedy of 'cultural action' that he offers, present at least as intellectually rich, if not as comprehensive, a model of education as Dewey had presented at the beginning of the century. Freire's model is more promising, at least to an Indian eye, than Dewey's in the present run of things, simply because it acknowledges conflict, and that too the conflict specifically arising from colonial subjugation, as the primary backdrop for making sense of the present-day world. As Freire explained to his niece, "while the centre of power, the north has become accustomed to framing the south. The north 'gives a north' to the south", Education is not worthy of being called education, we learn from Freire, if its epistemology does not reflect a critical perspective on injustice and oppression. In Freire's highly normative concept of education, learning necessarily implies an awareness of how 'my' condition is related to the state of the world.

And such awareness must meet the other standard set by Freire: the motivation to make one's contribution to some form of collective action.

The focus of pedagogic effort, in Freire's model, is on the cultural dimension of oppression. Although he sees oppression both in economic or material and cultural terms, it is in the cultural domain that he finds the key role of education. All his books emphasise the need for analysing culture as a means to identify the implications of oppression for the human personality and the social order. In this choice of culture as a critical area for education, he follows the established tradition of Marxist scholarship on Latin America and African history, especially on colonisation, and the socialist streak in theological literature. In Freire's approach to literacy, 'cultural action' aimed at setting the learner free to apply reason. 'Conscientising' involves an awareness that the oppressed are the creators of culture, and that the oppressors have, for generations, dispossessed them not only of the products of culture but also of the awareness that they are the true or authentic representatives of culture. In Freirean methodology, a literacy class is to be treated as a 'culture circle' where the relationship of men and women with nature is to be 'read' by reflecting on the work they do on natural material, such as clay, in order to transform such material. This kind of 'reading' of the world, its past and present, must precede, and not follow, the ability to read the word. For an example, an illustration given in *Education for Critical Consciousness* presents the sketch of a vase with flowers as a point of discussion on the theme of human relations with nature, Freire's commentary says: "During a discussion of this situation in a Culture Circle of Recife, I was moved to hear a woman say with emotion, 'I make culture. I know how to make that (the vase).'"

In all the situations illustrated in this manner in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, the emphasis is on digging out and revealing the original, that is pre-historic and historical, layers of the working men and women's consciousness of their role and importance. There is a distinct Jungian feel to the whole exercise. The illustrations given are stark, suggesting a kind of palaeography of the mind. It is important to note that all these 'situations' proposed for pre-literacy discussion portray pit-industrial or non-industrial kinds of work, such as hunting, digging a well, and pottery. The only symbol of technological advancement included among these generative themes, as they were to be

called, is a rifle, used by a lettered hunter'. Members of the culture circle are expected to discuss how the technological progress symbolised by the rifle represents 'man's increasing opportunity' which has meaning "only to the extent that it contributes to the humanisation of man, and is employed towards his liberation".

In this important early work we can recognise the 'fundamentalist' aspect of Freire which was ignored in a determined manner by countless agencies of adult or community education and governments in all kinds of countries. There was something rugged about Freire's philosophy and programme. It was clearly an ideological programme, but encased in its prescriptions was a streak of liberal hankering after a space for maintenance of dissent and dialogue. Although boldly prescriptive, and in that sense incompatible with the usual style of liberal pedagogues, especially in adult education, Freire's pedagogic stance seemed to question the state's monopoly over defining the post-world war visions of modernisation and development. Though there was no straight reference to industrialisation or any elaborate discussion of it in his writings, an implied criticism of industrialised man and that of the structures under which men and women were forced to live by conditions of industrialisation was all too evident. This implied criticism had many resonances; the ones of Mant and the Frankfurt school were easy to hear, but deeper down the voice of a Christian theologian reflecting on the poor - the ones actively dispossessed in the course of worldwide hunt for resources, labour and markets - could also be heard. Freire's historical perspective strongly reminded one of the dependency school of Latin American social scientists many of whom have now lost stamina. His educational principles were pervasive, inviting us to view educational change as a generalised process of the structural adjustment of a world constructed by colonialism. The point was made amply clear in *Pedagogy in Process*, a collection of letters from Guinea Bissau: "to discuss education, I repeat, is to think of the overall plan for the society itself".

Freire's method compels us to reflect on education in the context of a generalised critique of the organisation of society, its process of production, its systems of communication, and the values practised in its attempt to survive or prevail. That means the task of making people literate includes the exploration of all salient features of social life, such as institutions of race and caste, ownership of natural resources and

the patterns of the consumption of these resources. Such an exploration is not a 'post-literacy', but rather a 'pre-literacy' exercise. If this exercise is regarded as an essential part of Freire's method, then we can appreciate why it has no real use for the expert or bureaucrat who only wants to improve teaching techniques or material. Yet, despite being of little use to such people, the vocabulary associated with Freire's method proved greatly attractive to them. In country after country, including our own, it was co-opted by official programmes of mass literacy, with the obvious objective of imparting to these programmes a progressive gloss that might conceal their coercive character. These programmes were designed to socialise the masses into accepting the prevailing oppressive order as the only order, rudimentary literacy acting as a means to expose them more fully to the prevailing order so as to articulate and reinforce their acceptance of it.

#### CONCEPT OF DEEP LITERACY

In a theoretical sense, Freire's model of 'deep literacy' had a refreshing feel to it because it offered an intrinsic critique of as well as an alternative to the well-established behaviourist model of literacy. As a theory of learning, behaviourism has continued to dominate educational practice, including teacher education. Its appeal is rooted in its positivistic methodology and its promise of making the outcomes of teaching predictable. Its trivialising perception of learning, as a minimalist and explicit response, chimed well with the universalistic model of formal schooling. The concept of learning intrinsic to behaviourism resonated the temptation - felt in every country in varying degrees - to use mass education as a means of socialising the younger generation, to shape its basic need-structure and loyalties, in accordance with the ideology and lifestyle of dominant groups. Both nationalism and capitalism heightened this temptation. In countries of the west and the colonised third world, these two forces often worked together to determine the goals of mass education. In the communist world, the temptation to consolidate the nation-state by the ideological use of mass education required no justification or cover.

Freire struck at the behaviourist underpinnings of mass education in a manner one would least expect to succeed. The list of 10 characteristics of 'banking education' given in *Pedagogy* was highly simplistic, and decontextualised too as indeed the whole book was. Many such listings had been done earlier by liberal

critics of schooling. What was special about Freire's listing was that he used it as the ground on which a link between behaviourist pedagogy and the oppressive and unjust global order could be established. Freire avoided a frontal attack on the forces inimical to humanist education by not naming them, and we can guess why. Naming them would have limited his appeal to specific audiences steeped in similar naming. For instance, by naming capitalism as the core of the de-humanising system of education, he would have run the risk of being seen as yet another Marxist critic of capitalism. Both he and Illich - he too mounted a strong critique of mass schooling in the 1970s - avoided such clubbing by leaving their readers free to wonder about their intellectual slants. It would be correct to say that neither Freire nor Illich had ideological loyalties. They were both radical preachers, though Illich had been officially questioned and forced out of a formal affiliation to the Catholic church after an elaborate quarrel which he himself documented. Freire expanded his role as a preacher by assembling an all-out attack on a world characterised by gross material inequalities and cultural subordination. Freire's writings leave us in no doubt that the unjust order in which humanity is stuck cannot be challenged by developmentalist measures. He emphasises the unavoidable necessity of a revolution, but the nature of the revolution remains unclear, except that it must be based on an existential dialogue between those who attempt to mobilise others and these others. Freire's discussion of a revolutionary strategy is full of echoes; different kinds of readers can read the philosophers of their choice into Freire's words.

So it is not surprising, though it is disappointing to those who expected Freire's influence to extend policy options in post colonial societies, that his books were reinvented in all manners even as the crisis of the post-war international order deepened. During the decades when Freire became an inevitable reference in writings and courses on socially purposive education, oppression became a generalised state of being, of which just about everyone could partake, depending on the aspect from which representation of the self was required on a given occasion. In the background of this fluidity was the decline of objectivity as a means of knowing, and the blurring of categories which promised to distinguish one kind of existence and perspective from another. Freire had defined objectivity as a characteristic of knowledge about people which included their own awareness of their

situation. He had hoped to push educational planning beyond its typical database assembled with the help of a normative survey. His concern with the fuller situational picture, of which people's daily life was a part, implied that those who organise literacy programmes and other such activities will stop decontextualising people, stereotyping them as a part of a process which ultimately aims at disburdening prefabricated solutions to problems. But Freire's programme of developing in the planner and the teacher a certain degree of sensitivity to people's own perspective, and not just their suffering, assumed an ethical commitment to social transformation. This quality became increasingly scarce with the rise of developmentalism as a global financial enterprise. Aid by the rich nations to the poor had been used as a political tool earlier, but during the 1980s it became a specific instrument of quelling the social unrest anticipated in the Wake of a neo-imperialist onslaught of the regime of capital, accompanied by the expansion of satellite communication and transport technologies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, and the fresh impetus with which corporate interests struck out for markets and resources, together altered the nature and logic of social action in the 1980s. The establishment of communication links on a vaster scale than ever before radically enhanced the reach of financial capital. A general sense of despair and puzzlement set in among left-leaning scholars and leaders of social action who were not necessarily admirers of the Soviet model. China's warm overtures towards absorbing western capital gave further sharpness to the feeling that the world was destined to become more like what it had been, at least in the near future. The only revolution, this feeling suggested, that one might talk about with certainty was going to be in technology, especially that of communication and manipulation of information. For the political economy of poorer countries, the most important changes were going to be in factors of trade. The emerging world scenario seemed to strengthen the hold of the rich on natural resources and markets everywhere. In politics, the memory of the anti-colonial struggle was getting increasingly confused with the claims of neo-fascist elements that they alone represented cultural and political autonomy. Liberal spaces, where occasional resistance and critical enquiry might flourish, had started to close in even as the loud cacophony of personal consumption had become the main content of every media of information. Activism

aimed at social change had become a fully monetised service industry, copiously funded by international donors with a dear view that it would help contain within limits the feelings of the poor and the marginalised majority.

This portrait of the past decade or so, though sketchy, should help us appreciate the incorporation of Freirean ideas and terminology into the industry of voluntarism. The decline of state interest, formally as a condition of structural adjustment, in improving public education and health had pushed voluntary activism towards centre-stage. Public debate on state policy and efficiency shrunk. Social scientific endeavour to make sense of things started to look irrelevant, and job opportunities for young social researchers got confined to mechanised services and temporary involvements. The social science disciplines were also facing an internal crisis, brought about by the questions inherent in certain post-modern literary theorists concerning the stability and reliability of meaning in texts, including scholarly texts which provide historical and sociological analysis. Part of a broader post-modern front which promised to free the European mind from the memory of colonisation and the Nazi holocaust, such questioning gained easy currency in the Indian academia, chronically starved as it is of opportunities to contribute to theory-building. The new textualists emphasised the authenticity of experience, suggesting that no one could speak on behalf of others, hence any attempt to give a voice to the less articulate was at best meaningless, and at worst an act worthy of suspicion.

The concept of education as a voice-giving activity was inherent in Freire's association between illiteracy and what he called the 'culture of silence'. His insistence on historical analysis of people's conditions added perhaps an unbearable burden on prevailing conceptions of social work, but the basic premise that an educative activity involves external intervention was a part of his mode too. For Freire, successful education should present a new situation, not merely a sharpened version of people's common sense. The argument put forward by certain post-modernists that all representations are merely narratives, hence the need to accept infinite relativism, constituted a direct threat to the validity of Freire's model. His rebuttal of non-interventionism comes in a dialogue published in the *Harvard Education Review* in (Fall) 1995, and we hardly need to be surprised by its unequivocal tone:

I think it is an ethical duty for educators to intervene in challenging students to

critically engage with their world so they can act upon it and on it I do not accept the present philosophical posture in which truth is relative and lies and truths are merely narratives. They have the right to say so. They also have the right to say, as some thinkers have been saying, that with the fall of communism we have reached the end of history. They have all the right to propose what they want to propose, as I also have the right to reject their proposals. I would have to point out that history continues, and I cannot remain silent before an error. By the same token, if a student wants to kill himself in front of me in my class, I cannot remain neutral. I must intervene, as I must intervene in teaching the peasants that their hunger is socially constructed and work with them to help identify those responsible for this social construction, which is, in my view, a crime against humanity.

The elaborate explanation, and especially its justificatory tone, show how afflicted Freire was by the philosophy of non-interventionism and its implications for educational theory.

His legacy needs to be assessed in the context of the crisis in which educational theory finds itself. In the third world, Freire's locus of theorising, there seems to be no end in sight to the sharp contradiction between the two primary functions of education, namely, its selective or certifying function, and its function in enhancing the intellectual capital of society. The predominance of the first function is so overwhelming that the latter gets no chance to receive attention. As a consequence of this self-perpetuating situation, what Freire had called 'banking education' is flourishing. 'Banking education' is likely to flourish even more vigorously in the years to come as a result of further consolidation of class conflict in the wake of globalisation of exploitation and consumption. Trivialisation of knowledge and intellectual capacity as one of the many outcomes of the speed-centred technologies of transmission and retrieval of information can also be expected to fortify 'banking education'. These technologies pose a more general challenge to educational theory, applicable to the wealthy world as well, which arises from the diminution of space or milieu as a factor in learning. Engagement with the immediate milieu, both natural and social, which Dewey had proposed as one of the foundations of progressive education, has run into deep trouble with the advent of on-line lifestyle as a symbol of status and power. Even before the advent of this kind of space-conquering oblivion as a symbol of status and power, indifference

to the costs of capitalist opulence of the west incurred by the world's poor had become an acceptable feature of the western educated man and woman's personality. Throughout the 1980s one could notice the increase of inward-looking tendencies even among critical, left-leaning scholars. Their willingness to accept a 'coping' stance in the face of mounting pressures on the social foundations of educational theory was all too obvious. The challenge proposed by Rousseau, namely, to nurture the citizen without stifling the human, was becoming increasingly elusive as a goal of public education in the western world against a background of sweeping strides made by neo-imperialist ideologies.

Can we then say that Freire provided a mere ideological sop to live by during a period of all-round gloom and difficulties for humanist education? It is hardly unfair to say that Freire belongs to that short historical period which lasted from the late 1960s to the middle of the 1980s. Unmasking the powers of the oppressor seemed strangely sufficient in this period. Freire too did not offer any guiding clues on what might come after people have been conscientised. In the case of quite a few efforts inspired by Freire's ideas, local success in breaking the culture of silence was received with quiet suppression of the conscientised poor by their powerful masters and the state. Many drew the conclusion that Freirean pedagogy needed a wider, organised political movement to sustain conscientisation. This conclusion was consistent with the left's customary approach to regard educational reorganisation as a post-revolutionary activity.

Perhaps Freire intended, like Gramsci, to make political action against oppressive economic relations more democratic by permeating it with a definitive cultural stirring. In retrospect, it seems correct to say that Freire's emphasis on culture as the locus of educational effort was misinterpreted under the circumstances prevailing and unfolding in the 1980s. In India, the shedding of socio-cultural concerns by institutionalised politics gained speed from the early 1980s onwards. The emergency was the watershed after which political activity became exclusively concerned with power games, and the broader politics of social change fell to the share of non-party activists. Freire had warned us about such a separation in his first book, by criticising 'activism' as the obverse of 'verbalism' the former being devoid of reflection and latter of action. This and many other philosophical insights are part

of Freire's legacy which we now have enough time to peruse as we can now afford a fuller view of the pottery of the post-war international order. We should now know better that so-called globalisation marks no change, and that there are no shortcuts to evolving a society based on justice.

That Freire chose to title one of his two last books as *Pedagogy of Hope* is not without significance for guessing how he might have wanted his legacy to be read, at least in the immediate future. Defending hope as an 'ontological need' he cautions us in this book against optimism for its own sake as well as against the reduction of struggle to 'calculated acts' or to a 'purely scientific approach'. Increasingly more blatant strategies continue to surface to co-opt Freire into standardised, and almost inevitably globally internationally funded programmes of adult education. Funders and organisers of such programmes mouth the familiar vocabulary of dialogue, struggle and empowerment, garnish this vocabulary with references to the promise of the new communication technology, and finally present a recipe for change in the destiny of the poor. To maintain Freire's holistic vision of social action in a world ridden with globally mobile resource persons and, by definition, uninvolved consultants is difficult indeed. Even more difficult is to recall as a point of reference the subtle presence of Christian austerity in Freire's world of values. The application he found for Buber's concept of 'dialogue', and the attempt he made to establish dialogue as an existential necessity and as a definitive means of producing knowledge will remain major theoretical contributions to education. How his idea of knowledge as a tacit product of dialogue can be nurtured and explored further in a world held together by electronic impulses and nuclear deterrence is a question that those interested in Freire's legacy must attend to in the years to come. For the passing moment, these words from his final letter to his niece have an eerie ring of relevance:

The fascist threat may grow to the extent that, overwhelmed, the Left vacillates between denying itself by believing in neo-liberal discourse.. and reactivating Stalinism. Undeniably, the role of the Left today is to believe that it does exist, and to abandon authoritarianism and dogmatism. It is to overcome historical, philosophical, and epistemological errors, for example, that of setting socialism and democracy against each other.

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